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Care

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“What qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as ‘life,’ lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?” (Judith Butler, xxiv)

Care is a tightening of the throat, a constriction of the heart, a difficulty in swallowing. It is holding a loved one through seizures, it is ferrying a partner to a psychiatrist while his body is rigid with anger, it is the habitual counting and distribution of medications, it is the measuring of breaths. It is theorized and haptic, invisible and feminized, menial and critical, relentlessly anticipatory, and it consumes space, thought, and being. Care is why – and how – we are here. Writing in the wake of the global coronavirus pandemic of 2020, I am mindful that the affective and material importance of care has become all the more visible in the countless sacrifices made for the common good – the discomfort of an essential worker who sleeps in her car to keep her family safe at home, the end-of-life care rituals created by healthcare workers in impromptu COVID-19 wards, the marchers in the streets and the chanting of voices demanding justice and accountability for what matters most: breath, life, care.

In the ongoing loss rendered by COVID-19, we are asked on this occasion of the 50th-anniversary of the journal *Women's Studies* to reflect on what matters most. Since the establishment of this journal, nearly 1,000 articles have been published that place some kind of emphasis on feminist ethics of care, so this seems an apt place to reflect on the concept of care and its ambivalence. In the U.S. especially, events of the last year provided critical reminders of whose lives are treated as disposable, bringing increased visibility to how Black lives, Asian lives, trans* lives, and the lives of essential workers matter. In this country, care itself became reframed as heroic, although decidedly more in narrative than economic terms. The public space of the streets and the theater of COVID-19 wards across the country became vibrant, contested, and tragic places of embodied acts and practices of care – and their appalling lack.

There is a long and deep history of feminist theories of care – engaging broadly with the intersections of ethics, politics, ontology, ecology, psychology, race, sexuality, labor, and maternity.¹ While the authors of the recently

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¹Feminist scholarship has examined an “ethic of care” (Tronto), “transnational regimes of care” (Ticktin), the “global care chain” (Hochschild), “earthcare,” (Merchant), and “the disruptive thought of care” (Puig de la Bellacasa). To Black lesbian socialist feminist (and mother of two) Audre Lorde, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (205).

published *The Care Manifesto* open their tome with the statement that “Our world is one in which carelessness reigns” (*The Care Collective* 6) and examine the violence wrought by “careless states” (9), “careless kinships” (16), and “carewashing” corporations (13), I want to shift the attention here to where *carefulness* reigns, albeit often invisibly, as a feminist embodied practice.² For feminist theorists adopting a range of methods ranging from psychoanalytic to materialist to critical race theory, the practice of *carefulness* is complex, ambivalent, and often tied to a concept of the maternal in both material as well as symbolic terms.

To many if not all of these writers across the disciplines, care is about relation and accountability to our human and nonhuman others. For instance, feminist science and technology studies theorist Donna J. Haraway has tied the ethics of care to the complexities of “making kin” across and between species, and forming webs of what she terms “responsibility” (*Staying with the Trouble* 2).³ Writing from the perspective of Indigenous studies, anthropologist Zoe Todd argues that “reciprocity, love, accountability, and care are tools we require to face uncertain futures and the end of worlds as we know them” (383). Black feminist bell hooks complicates the relation between these terms reminding us that “care is a dimension of love, but simply giving care does not mean we are loving” (8). In a similar vein, Christina Sharpe argues that care is a “problem for thought,” particularly as she reminds us that it was the original name of the genocidal slave ship *Zong* (5,50). Visual studies scholar Jill H. Casid points out that etymologically, the English word “care” derives from both grief and trouble (125; see also Haraway). In the world of multispecies ethnography, Thom Van Dooren observes that “care for some individuals and species translates into suffering and death for others” (292), particularly in the context of wildlife conservation.⁴

These embodied and “ambivalent terrains of care” (5), as María Puig de la Bellacasa describes them, are rendered visible in the work of Cuban (US-based) photographer, performer, filmmaker, and installation artist, María Magdalena Campos-Pons. As a feminist artist of African and Chinese descent in the Cuban diaspora, she has consistently staged her own body (and occasionally her mother’s) as critical symbolic terrain to explore the concept of care and its origins in the racialized and gendered (maternal) body. In this sense her work poses a critical dialogue between theories of feminist materialism and work by BIPOC artists long engaged with questions of visual

²María Puig de la Bellacasa reminds us that “Care is omnipresent, even through the effects of its absence” (1). Alexis Pauline Gumbs observes how social and institutional structures render care as “the unsustainable work, the massive unpaid labor that breaks backs, hearts, and the visionary will of multitudes on a regular basis” (56).

³Haraway, 2008 writes in *When Species Meet*, “Caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning” (36).

⁴See Jenny R. Isaacs’ excellent dissertation.

representation. In engaging her own body as canvas and vessel for the orichas (transatlantic *espíritus* of the Cuban religion Santería), she formulates a diasporic aesthetic of Black feminist portraiture that connects the maternal body to nonhuman others such as spirits and the (maternal) ocean.

As a self-described “visual healer,” Campos-Pons engages the historicity and ambivalence of care in much of her work, but this is especially evident in her polaroid photographs from the series *When I am Not Here/Estoy Allá*, which was produced in the 1990s. The title—between here and there and between English and Spanish – highlights the artist’s ongoing exploration of the ruptures created between languages, nations, and cultural identities in the African and Cuban diasporas. In fact, one of the self-portraiture pieces in the series is entitled *Identity Could be a Tragedy*, highlighting the attraction of secure racialized, gendered, and national identities as well as their limitations. In this essay, I’d like to turn to her powerful feminist commentary on care (Figure 1), *Untitled (Breast and Bottle Feeding)* (1994), which represents a photograph of the Caribbean artist’s upper torso painted in multiple hues of blue, punctuated by white-painted crescent waves. As an artist long engaged with the iconography of the religious system of Santería, Campos-Pons employs the blue and white colors and symbols of Yemayá, the maternal spirit of the ocean and the mother of all the orichas. Many scholars have pointed out the way in which the artist foregrounds partial, fragmented, or dismembered views of the female body that highlight the ways in which transoceanic migration produces a fracturing of identity. Her focus on the breast (and in other works, the vagina) focalizes the viewer’s attention on the generative, caretaking, and also representational complexities of female embodiment.

This maternal figure of care is one of deep ambivalence, invoking a complex series of associations between the figure of Yemayá (as Our Lady of Regla in Cuba, the Virgin Mary) as well as the history of the “wet nurse” in the plantation Americas. Campos-Pons challenges the presumed “naturalness” of the female nude in western art history by painting her body in the colors of the divine as well as by overlaying two plastic baby bottles that are worn around the neck and lay flat, partially filled with milk, over the breasts. The baby bottles, which actively drip with milk, are positioned over the artist’s blue-painted nipples, rendering a nude that is concealed by prosthetics. These centrally positioned and artificial mammary glands are the focal point of the photograph, even as they point (and drip) downwards toward an open wooden vessel, directing us to think about the ways in which particular women’s bodies become vessels for the production of another’s nurturance. It brings to mind Hortense J. Spillers’ well-known observation about how the plantation complex interpolated Black women as “the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world” (395). While many scholars have examined this in relation to the plantation-era law of *partus sequitur ventrem* (the child



Figure 1. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Cuban, born 1959, *Untitled (Breast and Bottle Feeding)*, from the series *When I Am Not Here / Estoy Alla*, 1994, Polaroid photograph, 20 × 24 in. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth: Purchased through the Contemporary Art Fund; 2009.12. © María Magdalena Campos-Pons.

follows the (non)status of the enslaved mother), Campos-Pons offers up an alternative trajectory in the relationship of the Black female body as a portal to the divine Yemayá.⁵ This allows the viewer to experience the concept of the embodied portal – or vessel – in complex historical, spatial, and ontological dimensions of “trans-portion.”

Campos-Pons’ photograph complicates the concept of the empty female vessel and the way of representing Black women as “vestibular to culture,”

⁵There is an enormous body of work on this topic – sources that have been vital to my own thinking include Spillers, Sharpe, Weheliye, Jackson.

to draw from Spillers once again (155). It challenges the headless female nudes of European male art tradition in the active way the subject presents an offering to her viewers, just as the figure refuses the ontological traps of Eurocentric philosophies of binary, masculinist, secular thought. In her hands she holds an unvarnished, carved wooden vessel, created by the artist herself. In this way we might reflect on the Cuban terms for Yemayá and the orichas in relation to *potencias* (power, potential) as well as personal *caminas* or pathways to the divine.⁶ In material, secular, and genealogical terms, we might say that the boat invokes the historic transoceanic voyages of the artist's African and Chinese ancestors to Cuba as well as the more recent crossings of *balseros* to the United States. We might also read the boat more symbolically as a commentary on the ways in which women artists of color might refashion their historic representation as vessels into their own specific ontological, genealogical, cosmological, and aesthetic craft. As she holds the vessel tenderly toward the viewer (revealing seven painted fingers, the sacred number of Yemayá), we realize this refashioning is a radical offering of transportation, which is its own form of care taking.

Care in this photograph is focalized around the embodied imagery of the breast, milk, and vessel. Accordingly, we may note that the terms mammal, mammary, and mama are historically and etymologically intertwined. Clearly the artist is invoking the suckling, nurturing, and care-taking representation of the female breast here rather than its more sexualized or “virginal” forms. As we know from feminist scholarship, the scientific and visual representation of female breasts has complex colonial, racialized, and gendered histories. [Londa Schiebinger](#) has traced out how the figure of “nature” in European tradition was often associated with an exalted female breast, while women of color were represented as closer to non-human nature and animality due to presumed breast shape and size. [Jennifer Morgan](#) has examined how this gendered discourse in the colonial era was used to justify the enslavement of Africans (191).⁷ Certainly the weight of the plastic bottles hanging around the neck suggests the historical weight carried by the “wet nurse” in the production of the plantation Americas as well as western aesthetic forms. Yet in this particular image Campos-Pons disrupts any assumption of the naturalness of the female body and its , caretaking and nurturing propensities by the sign of plastic at the site of presumed nature. “[Untitled \(Breast and Bottle Feeding\)](#)” challenges the biological and natural function of feminized care and highlights its artificiality and performative production.

⁶My sincere thanks to both Judith Bettelheim and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert for a helpful discussion of these terms. See; [Paravisini-Gebert and Fernández Olmos'](#) new edition of *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*.

⁷See also [Jackson](#), especially on the black mater(nal) (39).

The title of the series, *When I am Not Here/Estoy Allá*, is indicative of the artist's engagement with the spaces between languages, bodies, and bodies of water. The figure of the breast in the image is both "not here" and "allá." Moreover, the "untitled" title – "Breast and Bottle Feeding" – highlights the tension between both forms of nurturance – one bodily, the other manufactured – yet suggests that they are both capable of "feeding" the viewer. Since the bottles are half-filled, one could implicate the viewer as already participating in this suckling, nourishment, and care. In a statement, the artist has written of her attempt to represent "the spaces that are constructed between dualities" (in [Frieman](#) 52) and in this sense the dualities here are thematic: the historic exploitation of Black women's bodies in the plantation Americas as well as perhaps our own participation in this as spectators as we too drink from the aesthetic and spiritual milk of the maternal oricha Yemayá.

To embody Yemayá, the mother of all of the orichas and spirit of the ocean, is to configure one's own body into a vessel and a more-than-human figure of regenerative life. Like other Caribbean artists, Campos-Pons creates a visual pun on *mar/madre*, as well as what [Kamau Brathwaite](#) has written of in terms of the "submerged mothers" of African diasporic history that must be reawakened and recuperated.⁸ It's a powerful move that harnesses the maternal ocean to call upon the spiritual, material, and evolutionary origins of (oceanic) life. The maternal generosity of Yemayá and her offerings are always mediated by material objects – in this sense the prosthetic mammaries invoke this mediation as well as the plantation histories that brought the Yoruban Yemayá to the Americas. In this spiritual "feeding" between breast (or bottle) and the one receiving nourishment we invoke the mammalian body's first sense of touch and of care after birth.

Touch has been one of the most notable losses in the worst years of the pandemic. Building on the work of Haraway, feminist theorist [Karen Barad](#) explains that touch is integral to understanding matter:

In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response. Each of 'us' is constituted in response-ability. Each of 'us' is constituted as responsible for the other (215).

Campos-Pons's polaroid images insist on this reawakening of this concept of touch between the maternal figure and child, even as she suggests that memory or experience of this might be prosthetic. But prosthetic care, ambivalent or otherwise, is constituted by response-ability in the wake of

⁸This maternal ocean is examined at length in [Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Tatiana Flores](#), "Submerged Bodies: The Tidalectics of Representability and the Sea in Caribbean Art." As we discuss, the French feminist work of Luce Irigaray foregrounded the gestational materialities of metaphor, particularly the play in some Francophone Caribbean works between the terms *mere/mother* and *mer/sea*. To; [Gaston Bachelard](#), "To love the *infinite* universe is to give a material meaning, an objective meaning, to the *infinity* of the love for a mother" (116). On "Submerged Mothers," see [Kamau Brathwaite](#).

ongoing violence, and is critical to the world-making process. In fact, care opens itself out to what Barad terms an “infinity of others,” human and otherwise. She continues, “so much happens in a touch: an infinity of others – other beings, other spaces, other times – are aroused” (206). And while the intimacy of touch is what is invoked in “[Untitled \(Breast and Bottle Feeding\)](#),” the uncanniness of the prosthetic mammaries suggests that acts of care might be haptic as well as invoke the limitations and violences of care that demand boundaries between one body and another.⁹

Van Dooren’s work on care has raised a provocative observation that “placing care at the centre of our critical work might remake ourselves, our practices and our world” (294). While this is certainly a turn that can revolutionize many disciplines, the past five decades of the *Women’s Studies* journal suggest that the ethics and ambivalence of care have been an ongoing discussion in feminist circles and has radically reshaped the representation of knowledge and being. In her poignant “guide to undrowning” Alexis Pauline Gumbs apprentices herself to marine mammals, asking “What would it mean to go deep with each other? what are the scales of intimacy and the actual practices that would teach us how to care for each other beyond obligation or imaginary duties?” (7) Bringing us into the depths of the “other mothering” figure of Yemayá, Campos-Pons embodies and visualizes these same questions, asking the viewer to reflect on their own participation in the intimate economies and ontologies of care.

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⁹See Puig de la Bellacasa who argues “Care is not about fusion; it can be about the right distance” (5).

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